

## Book Review of Jo VanEvery's (2016, 2018, 2019) *Short Guides*. Self-published.

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### Introduction

As an often-hyper-competitive environment, academia puts particular focus—and value—on publishing. Pre-tenured faculty members are expected to demonstrate their research capabilities through publishing,<sup>1</sup> while graduate students are encouraged to publish as much as they can before finishing their programs. Though initially devised in 1932, the phrase “publish or perish” (Rawat & Meena, 2014) increasingly functions as an accurate representation of how the academy works today: if you do not publish academic work—peer-reviewed books, book chapters, or journal articles—you are not likely to progress in an academic career. Though “publish or perish” is a colloquialism, it holds some truth. In a study containing American sociology PhD graduates, Warren (2019) found that tenure-track job candidates in 2017 published twice the amount that aspiring professors did in the 1990s. Warren concluded that because more students were completing their PhDs while the availability of tenure-track positions had declined, applicants were trying to set themselves apart from their peers by publishing at higher rates. Trends in Canadian higher education are similar: PhD graduation rates have increased while tenure-track professorships have decreased (Ross, Mah, Biggar, Zwick, & Modlinksa, 2018; McAlpine & Austin, 2018). What does this mean for graduate students who are considering applying for academic jobs in the future? Hopeful contenders must have a robust curriculum vitae (CV) that includes, among other competencies and experiences, a healthy list of publications. In order to successfully publish as a graduate student, however, you must be able to put words on a page on a regular basis.

Upon recommendation from a friend—and thinking it could not possibly slow down my writing output further—I ordered *The Scholarly Writing Process* (2016), *Finding Time for your Scholarly Writing* (2018), and *Scholarly Publishing* (2019). The texts were written by Jo VanEvery, a former Lecturer at the University of Birmingham who left the academy to become a program officer for a Canadian national granting agency and then a virtual academic career coach. These books are part of VanEvery's *Short Guides* series, which is planned to have five volumes. The impetus for the *Short Guides* came from the blog posts that VanEvery was writing for her website. After writing hundreds of posts she realized it had become difficult for users to find content on particular topics and decided to compile her writing into short books. The guides are purposefully short (52, 67, and 144 pages, respectively) in order for each of them to be read in one sitting. I finished all three in a little over an hour.

The *Short Guides* were not written solely for graduate students but rather for academics in all stages of their careers. Their intention is “to help you when you are stuck”; each book concentrated on a particular aspect of academic writing while offering advice and writing prompts to help you get un-stuck (VanEvery, 2016, p. iii). I found the books useful for three reasons. First, although the books are concise, they provided a considerable amount of detail on the various parts of scholarly writing, finding time for writing, and scholarly publishing. Second, they were extremely affordable. Since the *Short Guides* are self-published, they vary in cost between £1.99 for the eBook and £6.50 for the paperback (\$3.51 CAD and \$11.47 CAD).<sup>2</sup> Third, and what I identified as the most valuable component, is the focus on critical reflection as part of writing praxis. As the literature (e.g., Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Mezirow, 1998) outlined, reflecting on experiences can be transformative, producing new knowledges and skills. By extension, because VanEvery asked the reader to reflect on their writing within each volume, she has given the reader an opportunity to grow as a writer and scholar.

### The Scholarly Writing Process

The first of ten sections in the *Scholarly Writing Process*, “Writing as Process and Product,” began with the assertions that “writing is a process through which you create knowledge,” and “writing is a product that communicates knowledge” [emphasis in original] (VanEvery, 2016, p. 1). The reader is asked “is there an emotional

<sup>1</sup> Another significant component in tenure review related to research is the ability to be successful in winning major awards competitions, such as SSHRC Impact Awards or Partnership Grants.

<sup>2</sup> All prices and conversions in this manuscript are from May 6<sup>th</sup> 2019; prices at other times may be higher or lower.

element to your current stuck?” (p. 3). Follow-up questions about the reader’s writing project and strategies to challenge their thinking concluded the chapter. “Beginnings” introduced the idea of *gremlins*, which are the voices in your head that cause you to doubt yourself and your abilities. In turn, gremlins sidetrack your progress because they “have some kind of irrational fear of shitty first drafts. They don’t want you to have to revise. But that’s not how writing works. Writing is rewriting. Rewriting is writing. Shitty first drafts are essential to this process” (pp. 6-7). Reflexive thinking is again essential in this section; the reader was requested to think about what types of topics they are curious about and if they have thought of other ways of indulging these curiosities (e.g., drawing their work, creating a YouTube channel to discuss their research). “Moving Your Project Forward” prompted the reader to recall that they are the one propelling their writing onward as a researcher and also offered suggestions on how they could continue making progress with their writing.

As graduate students, we are writing for assessment by a committee and academia in general, though many of us are also writing for our communities and families. “From Process to Product: Who Are You Writing For?” requested that the reader consider who has influenced and may benefit from their writing. VanEvery suggested community, family, role models, celebrities, and academics but also noted that there are countless possibilities. “Determining Which Writing Products to Prioritize” provided some discussion on the different types of research publications available when considering where to publish completed work. This section was not particularly applicable for dissertation or thesis writing because it did not propose ideas for getting un-stuck. Nonetheless, the section is beneficial when thinking about where to disseminate research later.

Thematically intertwined with each other are section six, titled “Refining a Specific Writing Product,” and section seven, called “What is Finished?”; both sections dealt with perfectionism and knowing when a writing project is completed. The reader is reminded that perfectionism is not “about excellence”; rather, it “is a self-esteem issue” (p. 29). Thus, the reader—who is spoken to as if they were actively writing—should aspire to writing that is *good enough* for the purpose they have in mind. Good enough, VanEvery (2016) explained, “is not ‘the handmaiden of mediocrity’ but rather a specification of what excellence looks like in a particular context” (p. 29). Likewise, knowing when work is completed comes when the writer cannot refine an element in the writing “without radically changing the whole argument” (p. 37). These sections lead naturally to “Getting Another Perspective,” which raised the possibility of having others provide feedback. For graduate students this could mean family, colleagues, a professional editor, or their supervisor(s). “Submission, Revision, Publication” was written with the assumption that the reader was writing for publication, yet I see a parallel with submitting a full draft to your committee and the peer review process. Your committee will read your work and assess it for completion in the same way peer reviewers would. The difference is that instead of your manuscript being published, your dissertation/thesis is ready to be defended. The final section, “And You Keep Writing,” succinctly summarized the previous nine sections of the guide and concluded with a segue into the second volume.

## **Finding Time for Your Scholarly Writing**

*Finding Time for your Scholarly Writing* is more of a “how-to” book than the *Scholarly Writing Process*, but it relied on concepts and ideas introduced in the first volume. Composed of six sections, the first, “Everyone Struggles With Making Time for Writing” voiced a concern many graduate students have but may not be comfortable disclosing: “There is nothing wrong with you. You are not lacking willpower, planning ability, or motivation. Finding and protecting time for writing, especially during the parts of the year when you are teaching, is difficult” (VanEvery, 2018, p. 1). This is particularly applicable to education graduate students since teaching—as teaching assistants, principal instructors, K-12 administrators, and/or K-12 teachers—is often integral to how we fund our degrees. In “Planning to Include Writing,” the reader is encouraged to make concrete plans about writing because doing so reduces stress, decision fatigue, and anxiety. The components of a good writing plan and how to set balanced goals closed the section.

The section “Full Days” opened with the assertion that no one should use the adjective “binging” to describe their writing for two reasons. First, binges make people ill; and second, binging means doing something—in this case, writing—to excess. Two possibilities for managing day-long writing sessions are then offered as a way to avoid binging behaviours. The research day is described in the text as a workday each week where there is no teaching or meetings, which is contrasted with the retreat, a model where writers focus on writing for a few days in a row. Retreats, the reader is told, can be solitary or organized as part of a group (such as an academic department). Moreover, the reader is informed that “retreat” is a bit of a misnomer: travel is not required. Suggestions for how to

schedule research days and retreats included discussion on the importance of fuelling, exercising, and stretching the body, which concluded the section. Research days would be particularly useful for grad students without a lot of external demands on their time such as teaching, childcare, eldercare, or full-time work.

“Longish Sessions” outlined the effectiveness of a writing practice that totalled at least one hour at a time. More specifically, the reader is informed that (a) one hour-long session can lead to a substantial amount of writing, and (b) a ninety-minute, once-a-week writing habit will yield eighteen hours of writing in a twelve-week semester. Like the prior section, this one ended with recommendations for how to schedule these sessions in a week. “Short Snatches” recognized that on some days devoting time to writing can be extremely difficult. To overcome this VanEvery (2018) advocated for the reader to add fifteen-minute periods to their day to make sure they get some writing done. The reader is instructed to use “short snatches” in order to help develop a habit, make longer sessions feel more successful, and overcome resistance to writing. An additional benefit illuminated within the section is that these quarter-hour snippets can facilitate working on side projects without causing distraction. Likened to toddlers, if writers try and ignore these other endeavours “they keep poking at you” (p. 49), ultimately prohibiting forward momentum on all tasks. In combination, the advice provided in “Longish Sessions” and “Short Snatches” is essential for graduate students who want to find ways to schedule writing more regularly and frequently in their week. After all, one longish session of ninety minutes, once a week, plus five fifteen-minute sittings is nearly three hours of writing time: in other words, enough to make significant progress on a dissertation/thesis in the confines of an academic term.

The last section of the guide, “Figure Out What Works for You” is straightforward: writers need to know how to break up their week so that writing is completed. Most importantly, in order to make progress with writing, “you must prioritize it and find time in which to work on it regularly” (p. 55). Of the three books, *Finding Time for your Scholarly Writing* is the most immediately useful to graduate students because it focuses on the issue that is most apparent to writing: finding the time for to do so.

## Scholarly Publishing

*Scholarly Publishing* concentrated on some of the questions and concerns that academics face around publishing their work. Again, though not specific to the process of writing a thesis or dissertation, this guide can be useful for graduate students who are interested in disseminating their research. For those contemplating a career in academia, this volume is especially valuable; nonetheless, it is informative for anyone in higher education. There were six sections in this guide, each of which ended with questions for the reader to consider related to the writing process and research dissemination. In the first section, “What is Publishing and Why Do It?” the reader is reminded that the Latin word *publicare*—which means “to make public”—is where we obtained the term “publishing” from (VanEvery, 2019, p. 7). Publishing, then, should be considered the avenue through which the writer plays a role in adding to the existing dialogue on their research topic, according to VanEvery. The reader is encouraged by the fact that it is normal to have some anxieties about publishing, but to also remember that publishing is about communicating knowledge rather than “validating your worth” (p. 9). In this section a caveat is offered: one’s desire to publish—to disseminate knowledge—is sometimes at odds with the values of the institution. Despite the reality that academia often focuses on the number of items an individual publishes as VanEvery pointed out, the potential impact of an academic work should be the motivation for publication. Three types of impact someone should consider when publishing were listed: a) *instrumental impact*, which concentrates on how the work is used (e.g., as a methodology in another paper); b) *conceptual impact*, which adjusts how individuals may think about an idea or concept; and c) *symbolic impact*, which looks at how a work is used in a more abstract way (e.g., as the basis for updating policy).

The second section, “Audience, Form, Outlet,” focused on how the writer can decide which research conversation(s) to participate in and who to have them with. This section revisited some of content in “From Process to Product: Who Are You Writing For?” in the first volume. While “From Process to Product” had the reader query who they were writing for (e.g., community, family, dead celebrities) “Audience, Form, Outlet,” differentiated between who might read the text and the intended audience. The section also included a part that examined three types of publications: those for commercial purposes, those only for academic audiences (i.e., those accessible through institution library databases), and open access mediums (like *CJNSE*). “Books,” the third section, talked

over the pros and cons of publishing books in considerable detail. Included is information on monographs, being the editor of an edited collection, contributing to an edited collection, scholarly editions,<sup>3</sup> and textbooks. Also given in this section is information on how to find a publisher, how to write a book proposal, and how to obtain a contract for academic books. This section is particularly useful for PhD candidates because it provided a brief introduction on how to turn a dissertation into a book. “Peer-Reviewed Journals” posed how to choose the right academic journal, information about special issues, what a research note is, as well as a brief discussion on book reviews and review essays. These portions of “Peer-Reviewed Journals” were delivered in the same matter-of-fact phrasing as “Books.” Correspondingly, key advice on the ethical considerations of publishing a monograph based on previously published journal articles was noted in the fourth section, in addition to how academic institutions evaluate different types of publication. These two sections elaborated on some of the ideas brought up in “Determining Which Writing Products to Prioritize” within the first volume.

Taking a slightly different trajectory than the prior two chapters, “Publishing Work in Progress” looked at alternative ways of disseminating writing outside of books and journal articles: examples included conference papers and posters, working papers, invited seminars, blogs, podcasts, videos, and teaching. Those teaching should “consider lectures an oral form of scholarly communication in which you synthesize existing scholarly research and offer interpretations” (VanEvery, 2019, p. 103). Approaching the teaching role in this way allows you to “get feedback on arguments and approaches, and generate ideas, while supporting students’ development as novice scholars” (p. 103). This way of framing teaching is complementary to the pedagogical praxis we engage in as graduate students, particularly in post-secondary institutions: as classroom educators, we take what we know about a particular topic and share it with students who often do not have the same understanding of that topic. Although this is an informal means of knowledge dissemination, it is nonetheless vital for our students and ourselves.

The final section in this volume, “Improving Discoverability” reminded the reader of the importance of self-promotion of their work. “By letting people know it exists, ... you are reducing the time and energy [others] spend looking for relevant scholarship” (VanEvery, 2019, p. 106). Defined in this section are ways the reader can improve the influence of their scholarship, which is broken down by their research contribution and their ability to network. In terms of networking, writers are prompted to share their scholarship through direct communication (e.g., email, LISTSERVS), social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate), and during conferences. In order to optimize how their work appears in search criteria—and thus their impact in the field—three components are offered for consideration. First is the title, which should clearly reflect the topic; second are the keywords, which should indicate important foci within the paper; and third is the abstract, which should position the work in the research conversation, indicate the focus of the research, give information on methodology and/or theoretical approach, and state the argument succinctly. Strategies the writer could use to get their publisher involved in promoting their work conclude the section and the volume.

## Other Books on Writing

There are many other books available on academic writing. The *Short Guides* are different than most including the three I briefly discuss here. Although “intentionally short” at 121 pages, Inger Mewburn’s (2012) *How to Tame Your PhD* focused specifically on writing a dissertation (p. 6). Also self-published, the cost of Mewburn’s text on Amazon.ca was \$7.38 for the Kindle version and \$48.95 for the paperback. The other distributor, Lulu.com, charged \$13.29AUD (\$12.51 CAD). As Mewburn (2012) explained, some of the reasons students don’t finish their PhDs on time are “failed experiments,” “problems with writing,” and “poor supervision” which she said were “problems with the system and academia more generally” (p. 7). However, Mewburn did not recognize other extraneous factors such as lack of student funding/students needing to work (i.e., the role of teaching) while completing their programs. Moreover, although Mewburn allocated six pages to being stuck, she did not offer any suggestions for moving forward. This would have been an excellent place for Mewburn to discuss the importance and need for critical reflection as part of the writing process. Mewburn’s book is a worthwhile read for someone considering a PhD or who is early on in their PhD, but it does not put the same emphasis on writing as VanEvery’s *Short Guides*.

At 362 pages, *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process* by Rudeston and Newton (2015) is what I would call a not-at-all-short guide. Published by SAGE, the book was listed at \$57.00 USD

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<sup>3</sup> VanEvery explained that these are predominately present in literary disciplines.

(\$76.70 CAD). Apart from its length and cost, Rudeston and Newton's text is also dissimilar to the *Short Guides* because it is meant to be a comprehensive and instructive guide on how to structure and complete various parts of a dissertation. Since the book is intended to be a "how-to" guide, the authors assumed that the reader would not get stuck during the writing process, and as a result there is no discussion on—or apparently need for—critical reflection. If graduate students are looking, for example, how to describe their research tools within their dissertation or thesis, this would be a more suitable read than the *Short Guides*.

*How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* by Paul J. Silvia (2007) is the most similar to the *Short Guides* in content and approach; printed by the American Psychological Association, the second edition released in 2018 was \$19.99 USD (\$26.90 CAD) and 145 pages. Chapter 2 considered four obstacles that impede writing large quantities, including finding time. However, outside factors like teaching are not mentioned in this guide either. What is particularly interesting about this chapter is that Silvia—who completed a PhD in psychology and studies the psychology of emotion—does not problematize the use of "binge writing" other than calling it unproductive. Given the known negative effects of binge behaviours, I am bothered that Silva, as a psychologist, did not do more to challenge the adjective further. Like *Scholarly Publishing*, Silvia examined the writing of books and journal articles in Chapters 6 and 7, but offered a more "how-to" approach to writing these types of manuscripts based on the conventions of APA; goal setting (Chapter 3) and writing groups (Chapter 4) are included in this text too. This book differed from the *Short Guides* in two ways. First it recommended using visual scales (e.g., graphs, charts) to monitor writing progress (also Chapter 3). Second, it focused on the stylistic aspects of writing, which is covered in Chapter 5.<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning that Silvia (2007) argued that "writer's block only strikes writers that believe in it," and "scheduled writers don't get writer's block" (p. 47). I see these as facile points from a licensed psychologist who in his professional practice would recognize that people feel stuck for various reasons. Addressing why someone may feel stuck and including prompts that encourage critical reflection would improve this section of this book greatly.

## Conclusion

My only issue with the *Short Guides* was minor. When VanEvery referred to other authors within the text, there was no citation (i.e., there are no dates and page numbers). This information is included in the "Notes & References" section in each of the guides, but I prefer the specifications for citations as outlined in the *APA Manual of Style* (i.e., author, date, and page number included in-text within parentheses). My personal choice in citation style notwithstanding, I consider these books a welcome addition to my own book collection and ones I believe other graduate students would find helpful for their writing as well.

There are two features that set the *Short Guides* apart from other books on writing. The first one is the acknowledgement that as a writer you *will* get stuck. This is something that is mentioned in other texts—including others I did not discuss here—but does not serve as a focal point. I find the recognition that getting stuck was normal simultaneously comforting and refreshing (read: I no longer feel as bad about the times I have gotten stuck in writing). The second point is the focus on reflexivity in the *Short Guides*. Being asked questions about the work allows the reader to re-orient themselves to their writing process and think critically about what they are writing, why they are writing, and who they are writing for. The significance of such questions is imperative for graduate students writing dissertations and theses. These two facets make the *Short Guides* a great option for graduate students because the guides provide tools for getting un-stuck.

Another asset of the books is that they provided information about aspects of publishing that are often confusing or unknown to junior scholars. For graduate students who are interested in publishing or learning more about disseminating their work, the *Short Guides* presented solid background reading and offered suggestions for other texts to consider. Lastly, the combination of the short length and the compassionate-yet-humorous prose of the *Short Guides* made them an enjoyable read. Sometimes reading about writing can be as exciting as watching paint dry, but thankfully these texts were quite entertaining. Indeed, VanEvery (2019) even poked fun at herself: "Coffee rings have been pre-applied, so don't feel guilty about using a *Short Guide* as a coaster" (p. 3). As someone whose writing progress has not complied with "normal" metrics for degree completion rates, I am looking forward to using

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<sup>4</sup> In the second edition there is a chapter on writing grants, a topic that is not covered in the *Short Guides*.

the advice, tips, and critical reflection questions delivered in these three *Short Guides*—as well as the two subsequent guides which are currently in development—to get my dissertation written and defended.

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